

Religion and Politics: a reflection on Buckley's legacy and the continuing debate

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A PERSONAL PRELIMINARY

I should begin with a few personal comments that may give some useful background to what follows. Like many other intellectuals of my vintage, I owe Vincent Buckley quite a lot. He taught me many things, often indirectly, and helped shape my outlook on Christianity and its implications for life. As an evening student at Sydney University, I had been involved in the Newman Society there and had read the booklet *The Incarnation in the university*, a sort of manifesto of the Catholic 'Intellectual Apostolate' associated with the Newman Society at the University of Melbourne. Although some of the orientation of Buckley's chapter in the book was already familiar to me from the thinking that was going on in the Sydney Newman Society, the chapter, like much else in the volume, was inspirational and Buckley was clearly the major figure in a group of distinctive young thinkers. They had picked up progressive strands of theological and religious thought from overseas, notably from European thinkers like France's Cardinal Suhard and the Dominican Yves Congar, and the Belgian priest, later Cardinal, Joseph Cardijn (founder of the Young Christian Workers organisation) as well as American thinkers and activists like the founders of the Catholic Worker movement Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin, but they had also brought their own insights to bear, and in this Buckley was clearly the leader even though others made significant contributions. Their efforts were part of world-wide developments after World War II that loosened up the mind-set and the structures of a Church that was stagnating without realising it and prepared the way for the liberation of Vatican II, a liberation that promised so much more than it has subsequently delivered.¹

Later, when I came to Melbourne University for postgraduate study in philosophy Buckley and I became friends and associates in the Intellectual Apostolate's endeavours. We had a warm regard for each other, but there were also tensions between us, mostly about politics, and a certain distance as well. The distance was partly related to our different intellectual disciplines, but partly to my sense that it wouldn't do to get too close to such a bright and intense flame. It illuminated, but could burn and blind. Also, when Vin was drinking, which at certain periods was pretty often, there was little point in being in his company. He was one of those people who moved very quickly from sobriety to broody drunkenness, and it could be a depressing experience for a companion who was still sober or relatively so. This depression was increased by the fact that sometimes his fellow drinking companions were acolytes given to mimicking the great man's opinions and even their mode of delivery. Often enough this was a sort of rite of passage that allowed them later to find an outlook and a voice of their own, but it was irritating at the time. I don't think Buckley encouraged followers particularly, but insobriety and the need for associated companionship gave them fertile ground. It still amazes me how much he accomplished in spite of his difficulties with alcohol.

What follows is in two loosely connected parts. The first is a reflection on Buckley's attitude to politics, with special reference to the politics of anti-Communism. The second is a general, philosophical discussion of some topics to do with the relation of religion and politics that is

partly stimulated by issues which were prominent in the climate of the times when I first knew Buckley and by the fact that in the present intellectual and social climate those issues, or kindred ones, have emerged very sharply once more.

In my experience, Vincent Buckley was fascinated by politics but the fascination was tinged with suspicion, discomfort and sometimes bitterness. As indicated above, religion was also a crucial concern, at least for most of the time I knew him, though the form that this concern took changed over time and the ambiguities and subtleties of faith that were present in his vision early on became more prominent in his later years.

Vin liked to think of himself as an anarchist at heart and he was certainly wary of the pretensions of all forms of authority, whether clerical or secular. As far as I know, he wrote little theoretical on the relations of religion and politics; perhaps his most overt treatment of the topic was the famous editorial in the Australian *Catholic Worker*, of which he seems to have been the principal author, criticising B. A. Santamaria's Movement. This was the first statement in a Catholic publication overtly acknowledging the existence of this secret, hierarchy-endorsed operation and certainly the first to raise some aspects of the Movement that were deeply problematic. Buckley remained an opponent of the Movement and strenuously resisted attempts to set it up inside the university. He gives an account of his reasons for opposition to the Movement in *Cutting Green Hay*, but it is rather a diffuse treatment, laced with extensive comments on the psychology of major participants in contests around religion and politics. His opposition to the Movement was all the more interesting in that he shared the strong anti-Communist stance that was the *raison d'être* of the Movement and he admired, indeed "revered" (as he put it) Daniel Mannix and liked Bob Santamaria. The respect for Mannix was shared by many Melbourne Catholic intellectuals, whether conservative or liberal, in a way that I personally, as something of a Sydney outsider, could never understand. In Vin's case, it may have had something to do with Mannix's Irishry, his strength of character, and the intellectual background that marked Mannix off from most of his episcopal colleagues in the Australian Church. Certainly the Melbourne archbishop had a presence and intellectual style that distinguished him from Sydney's Cardinal Gilroy who was suspicious of intellect and devoid of anything that smacked of charisma. Mannix was also an individualist in a country that, despite its self-image, has a tendency to conformism. He was undoubtedly an impressive figure in many ways, but Vin's portrait downplays the destructive, darker elements of his legacy. These include his powerful support of the Santamaria faction, and of course Santamaria himself, against those elements in the Church critical of the Movement, a support which extended to what was, in effect, an episcopal ban on the circulation of the magazine *The Catholic Worker*, and to acquiescence (at the least) in the widespread clerical vilification of the religious bona fides of opponents of the Movement.

It seems to me that what Buckley objected to most in the Movement, apart from the dubious tactics it resorted to in the fight against Communism in the unions, was its attempt to employ the religious authority of the Church in a secretive way to promote partial political objectives. This was a form of clericalism, even though a principal agent in the campaign was a layman, so it misunderstood the relationship between Christianity and the world. This is a theme that I want to explore briefly in what follows. Buckley's opposition to the Movement's presence in the university also stemmed from his commitment to the autonomous significance of the intellectual life and the idea that values and projects should be tested against an individual's lived experience. To him the Movement seemed to aim at imposing directions and values with an authority derived from elsewhere, and often without much sense of the lived experience and legitimate internal norms of the institutions it sought to penetrate. His critique here was of a piece with overseas thinking that sought to modify or replace the incumbent picture of the

Church as an institution with all the answers ready to impose them on a benighted and ignorant outside world. He thought that the central idea of Christianity was the Incarnation, the idea that God had in Christ entered fully into the human and earthly experience. Hence, the idea of the Christian or the Church standing apart from the world, judging and imposing from a safe distance, was foreign to him. Such a stance could only distort the values to be found in the world and trivialise the message of the Gospel. I recall his approval when I quoted from the theologian Baron von Hugel (a friend of the modernist Catholic thinkers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries) to the effect that the drama of the Redemption was a matter of 'Christ in the Church calling to and answered by God in the world.'²

BUCKLEY'S ANTI-COMMUNISM

On the other hand, as I mentioned earlier, Buckley shared with the Movement a commitment to anti-Communism which became increasingly dominant, even strident, in his outlook after the 1956 suppression of the Hungarian uprising by Soviet tanks. Vin's anti-Communism was, I think, only loosely connected to the anti-religious element in Communism, though his sense of the subtle presence of the sacred in the world made him unsympathetic to the messianic materialism of Communist ideology. More centrally, his opposition stemmed from a rejection of the totalitarian oppression and brutal persecutions that marked the Communist states and their rejection of liberal democracy, plus personal experiences of the manipulative behaviour characteristic of many Communists.

This was of course an admirable rejection, but anti-Communism as a movement brought together some curious bedfellows and created some ugly phenomena. The most notable in the West was the McCarthyist movement in the U.S.A, but there were similar tendencies in Australia. Anti-Communists, Buckley included, were quick to recognise Communist subversion, spying and illegitimate violence, but blind or silent about the subversion, spying, and illegitimate violence of 'our' side in the Cold War. The Vietnam War brought this partiality into prominent focus, but there was plenty to take account of earlier and later, as with the C.I.A's role under the banner of anti-Communism in the overthrow of democratic governments in Iran and Chile with appalling consequences for the people of those countries.³ Nor should we forget the U.S role in the anti-Communist slaughter in Indonesia and its many government-authorised 'dirty tricks' in South America. Nearer to home, Frank Knopfelmacher's anti-Communist crusade at Melbourne University gained favour with Vin whose approval of the man allowed Knopfelmacher to try to use the Newman Society in his smear and other campaigns against those he regarded as soft on Communism. This association with Dr. K. was one factor in creating tensions within the Intellectual Apostolate between those who were Cold Warriors and those who were not. There developed a sort of political orthodoxy which was not as stifling as that promoted by the Movement, but had something of the same character. Those who dissented from the Congress for Cultural Freedom orthodoxy seemed to be few in number, and were characterised by such dreaded expressions as 'neutralists' (along with the leaders of India and other 'non-aligned' nations) or supporters of 'moral equality' between the superpowers. Sometimes more extreme epithets were deployed such as the charming phrase Knopfelmacher used to describe me to one of my Catholic friends: 'worse than human offal.' It was characteristic of the fascination that Dr. K. exercised on his Catholic allies that several of my friends in the Newman Society passed this remark off as harmless: you had to understand that this was the way central Europeans expressed themselves, they said.

My own view was that Knopfelmacher was psychologically disturbed and his influence on students and some staff at the university almost entirely deleterious. One of the other things that particularly disturbed me and others (like Peter Wertheim, Bill Ginnane and Paul Simpson) who were opposed to Knopfelmacher's influence and to Cold Warriorism more generally was the way single-minded anti-Communism tended to discredit social reform and radicalism at home. The alliance with right wing and conservative forces in our society that anti-Communist campaigns encouraged contributed to maintaining right wing governments in power in Australia at both state and federal levels for decades. Indeed, this was the primary *raison d'être* of the Democratic Labor Party (D.L.P), the party-political expression of those campaigns. The alliance meant that insufficient attention was given to dealing with wrongs that we could more directly influence at home, such as the plight of our indigenous people, poverty problems more generally, and the lack of independence and reflection in our foreign policies. I have sometimes wondered whether this imbalance was also related to the tendency in religious people to focus on great palpable evils, the evident work of the devil, so to speak, to the exclusion of those wrongs that are more diffuse and less obviously the work of evil people. In more recent times, George Bush's indifference to homelessness, poverty and health problems in his own back yard while he pursued Evil incarnate abroad may be an example of this tendency. From another direction, the Iranian religious leadership's obsession with the foreign 'Great Satan' provides a further example of the trend.

The particular forms that Buckley's anti-Communism took during the years of Knopfelmacher's greatest influence explain to a considerable extent the reputation that he acquired in some literary and cultural circles as a man of the right. This characterisation irritated Buckley: he thought that his political stance was that of an independent with a sympathy for many left wing causes but with a suspicion that too many of the self-styled left refused to sail under the anti-Communist flag for bad reasons. As he put it in a poem critical of the Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko, he saw himself as someone 'who had always walked left and thought Jerusalem' (McLaren 177). Yet although he was quick to see the ways in which leftist hostility to capitalism blinded many intellectuals to the faults of Communist states, he was slow to see obverse failures of vision in critics of totalitarianism who couldn't see the many horrors and follies that Western democracies committed in their single-minded Cold War policies. According to John McLaren, Buckley voted for the D.L.P in the Senate in 1961 and 1964 since James McAuley had persuaded him that the D.L.P was working for ultimate reunification with the A.L.P This not only showed extraordinary naivety, given the D.L.P's tenacious support of successive conservative Coalition governments in order to keep the A.L.P out of office, but also a tendency to submerge all other political considerations to the cause of anti-Communism. This tendency reached its apogee in his reaction to the war in Vietnam. Until the later phases of the war, Buckley was a strong supporter of America's war and Australia's involvement with it. McLaren says that neither Buckley nor his friend Brian Buckley (no relation) supported the U.S mass bombing of Vietnam and Cambodia and sent telegrams to the U.S State Department saying so (204). I don't know the evidence for this private protest, but I never heard either Buckley protest publicly about these events. If they confined their protests to such telegrams then the effort surely recalls in its naivety Dr. Evatt's infamous communication with Molotov over the Petrov affair.

Another powerful political interest that displayed rather different tendencies was Buckley's concern for the Catholic community in Northern Ireland during 'the troubles' that began there (or re-emerged) in the late 1960s. As his commitment to Catholicism as a religion waned, so his involvement with the struggles of Irish Catholics seemed to increase. This shift to a more ethnic or cultural commitment on behalf of the (mostly) Catholic traditions in his past made

for a more leftist stance, in that it allied him with a revolutionary struggle against British (and Protestant) power. It was, however, an irony of this alliance that it forced him into an endorsement of the I.R.A, a group which not only employed violence but, from time to time, terrorism. It might be argued that he never endorsed such resorts to terrorism, and it might be added that only some factions in the I.R.A were responsible for terrorist attacks. As to the first, I never heard Buckley publicly endorse I.R.A terrorism, but neither did he publicly denounce it, as might be expected of someone who had strongly opposed terrorism in other contexts, notably by the Viet Cong. As for I.R.A factions, it is true that some were more involved in terrorism than others, but none were totally free of its taint. This concern for the plight of the Catholic community in Northern Ireland might appear to have little to do with theoretical issues about religion and politics except for the fact that the 'sides' in the conflict were predominantly defined by religious categories, though these often masked ethnic, class and imperial divisions. But the background to 'the troubles' was itself something that involved religious persecution since being Catholic meant being excluded from influential public positions and access to power in a variety of ways. Sectarian memories and animosities were frozen in time in the North of Ireland in ways that had disappeared elsewhere.

RELIGION AND POLITICS—EXCLUSIONISM AND ITS PROBLEMS

One of the interests in addressing these matters involving Buckley and the Intellectual Apostolate is to get clearer about a host of issues to do with religion and politics. A primary issue is what is often called 'the separation of Church and State', and this was prominent in the controversy over the Movement. It encompasses several sub-issues. A simple interpretation, with some merit, is that, in a democratic, pluralist state no religion should be established by law. This faces the problem that in many such states, notably Great Britain and the Scandinavian countries, there is such an establishment. There are two responses to this: one is to say those states are in the wrong, and the other is to say that these establishments have such weak effects that they are tolerable because they respect the underlying principle that the state should disadvantage no-one by virtue of their religion. I favour the first response, though I see the point of the second, and so would not want to make a big issue of the matter. Another interpretation of the separation is what I call the extreme exclusionist view, namely, that religion and politics should have nothing to do with one another. This is clearly more radical than the first, though the impulses behind the two views are related. It is sometimes fuelled by the idea, which dates back at least to some views of the seventeenth-century English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes, that religion is too dangerous to be allowed any place in democratic (or other) polities. There have been many recent diatribes against religion that rely upon this idea, notably that by Christopher Hitchens and a variety of other atheist intellectuals. Another driver for the exclusionist view is that a pluralistic, democratic society can, as a matter of principle, only be a secular society. I have some sympathy with the impulses behind both of these ideas, but I think that they are too one-sided. This is for several reasons. In the first place, I do not think that the record of religion is as bleak as the critics say, or, at any rate, the violent tendencies of religion need to be balanced against two counter tendencies. First, there is the dreadful record of violence and abuse by secularist ideologies since the emergence of the modern secular state, most obviously the Fascist, Nazi and Communist states, though democratic states cannot be excluded entirely from the picture. Second, there is the record of religion on the other side of the ledger, namely, the remarkable good works that religious outlooks have inspired, such as the selfless work of the Salvation Army, St. Vincent de Paul and similar organisations, the prominence of religious people and leaders in peace movements, the many positive contributions of religious people to the

American Civil Rights movement and to the overthrow of the apartheid regime in South Africa, and these are only a few of countless examples that could be given. Nearer to home, a striking example of the powerful, salutary effects of religious conviction can be found in the commitment of religious groups to the support of persecuted refugees during the infamous detention centre regime of the Howard government, and also in the selfless compassion of small groups of religious people working with the aboriginal community. On the latter, a particularly pertinent Australian case study would be the life of Fr. Ted Kennedy who was a tireless friend and supporter of aborigines, mostly, though not exclusively, those who were urbanised and destitute. Kennedy had been a chaplain to the Newman Society at the University of Sydney in the 1960s, and was influenced by the religious thinking of the Intellectual Apostolate, though he drew upon other sources as well. After leaving the university, he became parish priest of Redfern, an inner city suburb with a big aboriginal population. Kennedy's growth to legendary status with Indigenous Australians is well told in Edmund Campion's recent book, *Ted Kennedy: Priest of Redfern*.

A further problem for the extreme exclusionist view is that it is impractical. It would require religious people to treat their religion as a purely private affair, whereas for most religions the faith they involve has an essentially ethical and social dimension. Religion, that is, usually involves a world-view or at least a broad outlook that has implications for how to behave in one's community and that must include implications for one's politics. Moreover, it is quite unclear how a religious influence upon a citizen's political thinking and activity could be legally excluded in a democracy. But perhaps the basic exclusionist position concerns what should be encouraged and discouraged rather than legally enforced, or what can be legitimately criticised from a pluralist democratic viewpoint. Even here, there would be much that would be excluded if religious reasoning and motivation were barred from any influence in the public sphere: the civil rights movement in the U.S.A, mentioned earlier, is a good example of an enlightened social movement that was inspired for many participants by an explicit religious commitment to the equality of all God's children, regardless of race.

There is furthermore a question of principle involved for democrats. If we deny religious reasons any role in public discussion and debate, then what are we to say of other ideologies or what the philosopher John Rawls calls 'comprehensive doctrines'. Most, perhaps all, of these seem essentially controversial amongst people of good will; although they are open to reasoning, their validity seems beyond the determination of reasoning that must command assent from anyone who sincerely considers them. Philosophies like utilitarianism, Kantianism, feminism or natural law, or politico-economic theories like socialism or free-market capitalism all have committed adherents and all have implications for public policy, but the grounds for accepting them can be quite opaque to outsiders. If we were to exclude religious considerations, motives and values from a role in politics and public policy, how could we allow these others to have a role?

This complaint lies behind those criticisms by religious people who object to secularism having a privileged place in democratic societies. This complaint is, however, potentially confusing, and the confusion returns us to the earlier point about the separation of Church and State in a way that may be helpful. There is an ideology of secularism: we see it at work in various countries that strive to keep religious symbols out of public places, as the French, for instance, try to do in prohibiting the wearing of Muslim headscarves in public schools. But this sort of hostility to religious symbols is not required in order to give sense to a defensible idea of a secular society. A secular society is one in which no religious or comprehensive doctrine is privileged or mandated for citizenship and office. If it is democratic, or more particularly, liberal democratic, it is also one in which citizens have basic rights, including

civic equality, regardless of their religious outlooks (except where their outlooks deny such rights to others).

Finally, if religious people are to play a part in public life and to exercise their religious values in doing so, are there constraints that both democratic politics and authentic religious impulses should put upon such a part? This is a huge topic that I can only touch upon here. The main constraints come from both political and religious understanding. Some of these are:

Publicity and Non-manipulation. One of the things that worries people about the role of religions or ideologies in public life is not their presence but their covert operation. It is not that people object totally to the offering of exclusively religious reasons for policies, so much as they object to the operation of religious or other sectional pressures behind the scenes. There is an important publicity condition in a liberal democracy, and the philosopher Immanuel Kant was one of the first to see this. As I understand this condition, however, it is misconstrued as the offering of reasons that everyone could accept. It should rather be seen as the offering (and operating) of reasons that everyone can scrutinise. This should not only flow from a commitment to the equal respect that underpins democracy, but from religious doctrines about the respect owed to other persons. One of the things that disturbed Vincent Buckley, and other critics of Santamaria's Movement, was the secrecy of its operations, the dissimulation of its leadership about the bishops' role in its furtive activities, and the disjunction between its public professions and its private practices.

The Value of Compromise. In a pluralistic society there are inevitably stages at which compromise must occur if policy is to proceed at all. The topic of compromise is difficult and sensitive, but the idea of compromise is an essential ingredient in all politics, and has an even more significant role in democratic politics in pluralist societies. There are I believe basic virtues, values and principles that should be beyond compromise, but the capacity to compromise on interests, goals and the implementation of values is not only a necessary ingredient in all political life and community policy procedures, but is itself something that contains positive moral elements. One of these positives is recognition of the complex realities that ideals, policies, and projects must engage with and overcome in order to be realistically implemented: this might be called the constraint of realism and it calls for the virtue of prudence. A second positive element is acceptance of the worth of others engaged in a common enterprise and this requires some acknowledgement of the values and commitments that give meaning to their lives. Clearly, these elements are also open to a religious endorsement.

The Complexity of Value Conflict. Some of the value conflicts that bedevil public policy are indeed between groups who have profoundly conflicting moral outlooks, values or principles. Others, however, involve conflicts between values that are shared by the parties but are given different weights or interpretations. There is an important role for imagination in dealing with situations of this sort. Since human actions are multi-dimensional and can be variously described and variously justified depending on the angle of vision adopted, the parties to disputes about policy often appear to be arguing at cross-purposes, even discussing quite different actions. Imagine a debate about some action X that involves the application of science to human reproduction. If A thinks of his proposed action X as advancing the happiness of childless couples, and B thinks of X as endangering the institution of marriage, while C thinks of it as threatening the well-being of the children to be born of the procedure, they are likely to have very different attitudes to the proposal and are likely to reason in very different terms about what is to be done. To advance sane policy discussion, it is necessary for

all participants to abandon the blinkers that make it impossible for them to view the proposals under more than one or two favoured aspects. This is important because very different descriptions of the one act may all be true, or at least plausible. It is only when diverse perspectives are given due credit that underlying value divergences and agreements can be properly assessed and argued. This may require a difficult balancing of values that are recognised by all parties but are in conflict in a specific situation.

The subtlety of religious conviction. It is a confusion common to both religious and non-religious people to conflate the authenticity of a religious commitment with the authority of religious leaderships. This confusion is most pronounced in religions with a strong institutional structure, such as Catholicism or Shiite Islam, but it is also present in less formally structured faiths such as other versions of Islam, or the more loosely structured Hinduism or even Buddhism. In the case of Judaism some versions have more authoritarian internal relationships than others, and the situation is compounded by the peculiar position of Israel in defining (or seeking to define) Jewish loyalties and attitudes. On moral and political questions of any complexity, the diversity of judgement within religious communities is often quite pronounced, and this is also true even of central doctrinal questions. Religious authorities, such as popes, bishops, mullahs, imams and lamas, are understandably reluctant to admit the legitimacy of such differences, but they are of the first importance from the point of view of politics. In Australia, Cardinal Pell claims to speak for the Catholic 30 percent of the community on such matters as stem cell research, the morning-after pill, homosexuality, euthanasia, and various issues of national and international affairs. But Catholics are not only divided on these matters, but in fact very large numbers of them reject the 'official' line on contraception, abortion, I.V.F, stem-cell research, homosexuality, and various associated political matters. Perhaps they are not 'real Catholics' in the eyes of some church leaders, but they identify as such, which is the most important thing from the viewpoint of the relation of religion to democratic politics. Moreover, Catholics who are 'real' enough to think exactly as does Cardinal Pell, or for that matter, the present Pope, on all or most of the matters mentioned above are likely to be a small part of that 30 percent. We cannot understand the role of religion in public life without appreciation of the subtleties of religious belief and its implications.

And finally, there is the importance of reasoning, and listening to the reasoning of others, including those of different religious beliefs or of none. Reasoned discourse should be central to both politics and religion. Contrary to what is often claimed in anti-religious polemics, most religions give some prominence to reason in their religious outlook and this is inevitable since thinking is so engrained in all human activities that having reasons for one's actions and thoughts is part and parcel of what they are and can be. This is not to deny the distinctive nature of faith or the varying weights that different religious traditions give to natural reason. Nonetheless, interpretation, no matter how unacknowledged, is central to understanding scriptures, traditions, authoritative pronouncements and faith itself. Reliance merely on the bare uninterpreted verdict of scripture, tradition or authority is not only unlikely to persuade others, but it can be false to the self-understanding of faith and the imperatives of growth and experience. These sources of insight were those that Vincent Buckley tried to place at the centre of his intellectual and spiritual life and his restless quest to embody them should evoke gratitude in all who felt his influence.

NOTES

¹ Buckley discusses this ‘intellectual apostolate’ and its significance in his *Cutting Green Hay*, and John McLaren analyses it in his book about Vincent Buckley, *Journey Without Arrival*. Edmund Campion has an interesting discussion of the foreign influences on the Australian Catholic intellectual revival of the 50s and 60s (with special reference to the Sydney scene) in his *Ted Kennedy: Priest of Redfern*.

² I have subsequently been unable to locate this quote in von Hugel and I have the slight suspicion that it should read ‘Christ in the Church calling to and answered by the Holy Spirit in the world’ but for present purposes this variation is not important.

³ The C.I.A’s record of subversion of foreign governments and immoral covert blundering in foreign policy is elaborated in Tim Weiner’s *Legacy of Ashes: the History of the CIA*.

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